

Southern Development Homes

A diversified local homebuilder serving Charlottesville, Virginia

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Southern Development Homes is a diverse homebuilder and developer based in Charlottesville, Virginia. The company was established in 1999 by Frank Ballif. Ballif still owns and operates the company as president and leads the operation's sales division. He built his first home while attending the University of Virginia, funding his first venture with a loan cosigned by his mother.

The executive team at Southern Development Homes is relatively young. Ballif and his two vice presidents are all the same age: 36. Chris Winn, vice president of construction, has been with the business for two years with more than 14 years of experience building homes. Charlie Armstrong, vice president of land development, joined the business 11 years ago after managing projects for an environmental consulting firm.

Together, the three company leaders oversee a staff of around 30 people. Southern Development Homes also works with a network of loyal and reliable subcontractors. "We tend to work with local contractors," Winn explains. "Around 70 percent of our subcontractors have worked with us for more than eight years. They each provide high quality work so we continue to contract with them again and again. We have stuck together, even throughout the downturn. We enjoy working together and we have a lot of loyalty in these relationships."

Strategic growth

Over the years, the Southern Development Homes team has worked hard to establish the business as a leading local homebuilder/developer serving the Charlottesville area. "There are a couple national builders in our market, but our quality builds repeat business and referrals, which have contributed significantly to the growth of our company," says Winn.

As a builder and developer, Southern Development Homes takes a twofold approach to home construction. As one of only a handful of companies in the area performing both of these services, the business is able to offer better volume, turnaround for home construction and control over the feel and look of the communities.



“As a developer, we are in a unique position,” Winn elaborates. “We have some pristine land opportunities in our area. Purchasing this property keeps us stable. Instead of being tied up purchasing a majority of finished lots from developers, we have some control over our market.”

Throughout the economic downturn, Winn and his team took the opportunity to build resources. Instead of slowing down, the company invested in more land. Now that the market is coming back, this decision has provided Southern Development with ripe opportunities.

Building a reputation

With broad resources in terms of both land and strategic partners, Southern Development Homes has been able to stand out from competitors in the regional market. Buyers have come to expect a high standard of quality from the business as well as an efficient turnaround time for new home construction.

While single-family homes make up a significant portion of the business, the team serves a broad market. Homebuyers in all stages of life can count on Southern Development Homes for a range of offerings, including townhomes, villas and detached homes of various sizes.

“Our townhomes tend to cater to first-time homebuyers,” Winn notes. “We also build smaller single-family homes, which are typically move-up buyers for people who are looking to get out of the city and maybe start a family. We also have larger single-family homes to serve move-up buyers who are looking for more space and that category includes some higher-end builds as well. We also build single-level homes, either as detached houses or villas, which are a great fit for active adults.”



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“While we do customization work for around 70 percent of our buyers, we do not consider ourselves custom homebuilders,” Winn clarifies. “Our clients choose a layout from a selection of floor plans and are allowed latitude to tailor the home to their needs.

The company’s full-service design center helps to personalize each home. Southern Development Homes provides buyers with a broad range of exterior and interior finish choices. Skilled consultants work directly with customers to choose fixtures, appliances, cabinets, countertops, siding, shutters and other personal features. This has resulted in a 100 percent customer satisfaction rate with the overall process.

New neighborhoods

Southern Development Homes has constructed several new neighborhoods in the Charlottesville area in recent years. With communities that serve a wide range of homeowners, the growing homebuilders market has been good to the company.

One of the company’s most successful projects is Hyland Ridge. The sprawling community sits on 142 acres of green hills and the neighborhood offers larger single-family homes on half-acre lots. These

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home options range between the upper-\$500,000s and the mid-\$700,000s. “This project completely crushed our expectations,” Winn says. “We have sold 22 homes in the past year.”

In the townhome market, Southern Development Homes offers Pavilions at Pantops with four available floor plans. “We have roughly 40 homes left there to build,” Winn says. “That has been a steady market for us and we have been constructing 15 to 20 homes each year in that subdivision since 2007. We are building an infill community in downtown Charlottesville.

It features a contemporary townhome, walkable to Charlottesville’s downtown mall and has shown strong demand with urban buyers.”

Another community, Dunlora Forest, features EasyLiving and EarthCraft certified villas. These designs are targeted for active seniors. Neighborhood amenities such as walking trails and community gardens promote a vibrant social environment for retirees and a neighborhood playground is a favorite among residents’ grandchildren. “We had 38 lots and we pulled the first and last permit one year to-the-day apart,” Winn notes. “We developed and built this community that completely sold out in record time.”

Other single-family and villa communities geared toward retirees include Village Oaks and The Villages at Nahor. Southern Development Homes adheres to EasyLiving standards to make carefree living easier for seniors. These homes feature stepless entry and doors measuring two-feet, 10-inches wide for easy accessibility, promoting “easy” single-level living.



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Better Living has tremendous respect for Frank Ballif, the quality homes that he builds, and his ability to find the right people to get the job done. His staff is pleasant and professional. You can tell by their admiration for him that Frank is the real deal. I met Frank over twenty years ago. He had just graduated from the University of Virginia and was working in the construction business. Intelligent and charismatic, I was not surprised when Frank started his own business and when Southern Development Homes became one of the largest residential builders in Central Virginia.



Better Living Building Supply has been with Southern Development from the beginning. Our staff works with his team to supply a wide range of construction materials used throughout the building process. Our relationship has been successful because we share the same commitment to provide quality results for our customers. Southern Development Homes are distinguished by design elements and options that are affordable and add value to the home. At Better Living, we strive to provide innovative products that help meet this goal. Better Living is a proud participant in the legacy of Southern Development Homes which continues to honor and influence the beauty of our community.

Better Living is a local business established in 1893. We provide building materials and custom cabinetry from two lumber yards and a custom mill shop. Manufactured roof trusses, floor trusses, and wall panels are available through Better Living Components, Inc. Better Living Furniture provides quality furniture and name brand mattresses for every style and budget. Samples of our furnishings are visible in Southern Development model homes.

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Staying ahead

While Southern Development Homes has been reaping the benefits of a recovering housing market in recent years, the recent economic downturn presented challenges, limiting growth. "The development side of our business stalled," says Winn. "Banks weren't willing to finance new development and builders focused on lots where infrastructure was already in place."

To get through those lean years, the company got creative, explains Winn. "We worked for smaller margins – lean and mean," he says. "It was tight, but we kept all of our employees and subcontractors and everyone got paid. Because of that, we have even better relationships with our subcontractors. We kept them busy and paid our bills on time, which not everyone could manage during that time. People wore more hats than they normally would, but that's what it took to get through."

The market has picked up significantly through 2014 and into 2015, but Winn says there is still room for growth. As the recovery chugs steadily along, the business remains focused on providing high-quality, integrated services to customers. These homebuyers return when it is time to move into something bigger or smaller and refer their loved ones to Southern Development Homes.

Customers are not the only ones who have praised Southern Development Homes. The company has been awarded Favorite Homebuilder four years in a row by local newspaper, the Daily Progress. EarthCraft Virginia selected Southern Development Homes as Single-Family Builder of the Year for the team's dedication to sustainable building practices.

Southern Development Homes is not just a great company from which to purchase a home, but also an excellent place to work. "We have a great team here," Winn says. "Our people have fun while building success. Company morale is strong. We want our team and subcontractors to feel they are part of the family."

This employee and partner satisfaction translates easily into quality service and craftsmanship, reinforcing Southern Development Homes' position as a leading local homebuilder in central Virginia. •